

# The Social Pirates

# The Master Swindlers

STORY NO. 8

Plot by George Bronson Howard, Novelization by Hugh C. Weir

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**M**ONA HARTLEY and Mary Burnett surveyed, with something like loathing, the meal that was to serve them for dinner. A few buns, a package of crackers, a bottle of milk. Filling enough, such food might be, but it was neither appetizing or satisfying in any real sense and their surroundings would have amazed those who had known them in the days of their prosperity. They were in a cheap room of a cheap lodging house, and their clothes were shabby. Their personal belongings had been reduced to a minimum.

"Oh," said Mona, despairingly, as she picked up a bun. "Mary—if we could only have a real dinner—in a place where the waiters know what you want before you do yourself, and the linen is clean and the silver bright—"

"Don't!" said Mary, sharply. "It only makes it seem worse if we think of things like that." "Oh, I know," said Mona. "Mary, something has got to turn up pretty soon. Do you realize that we haven't had such a run of luck since we first decided that we had a right to make the world pay us the living it owes us?"

**BUNS** again," said Mary, next day. She looked regretfully at the single dime she held in her hand. "Ten cents apiece for dinner, Mona. Come on—let's dine out! We'll buy our buns and eat them in the park or some place like that." "All right," said Mary, listlessly. "I saw a store yesterday where the buns looked bigger than at the place we've been going to. Let's try them. It's not much farther."

Important events have hung on decisions as trifling and as wholly dictated by chance as that one of the two girls to try a new bakery. While they were selecting their buns they saw a young man who was giving an order at the desk. He was a flashy-looking youth, with a touch of the Bohemian about him. And Mona, peering at him, was convinced that she had seen him somewhere in the past. He paid no attention to either of the girls, and Mona had a good chance to study him. She noticed that he kept his left hand carefully in his pocket. But an accident, the dropping of some of the coins he had received in change, compelled him to remove it and saw Mary's attention was attracted as well as Mona's. Both were struck by the curious tattooed design on the back of the hand, a design familiar to them as "The Devil's Sign," consisting of a small demon dancing on an inverted cross. But it was only Mona who seemed to see any real significance in this. Mary understood her signal, and they both followed him.

"But why?" asked Mary, when they were on his trail.

"I think I know him," said Mona. "And if I am right I believe we're not wasting our time. There's no reason why we shouldn't follow him. Is there? There's nothing else that we have to do that is more promising?"

"I suppose not," said Mary. "But that doesn't mean much."

Even when the young man turned in at the impressive entrance of the Columbian Art Museum, Mona insisted on following him. And when she saw him sit down before a certain picture, she unpacked a small easel, and set to work copying the picture, she was greatly excited.

"Come on," said Mona. "I want to see the picture. I think I know it, but I want to make sure."

"It's the 'Monna Vanna,'" said Mary, after they had slipped up behind the painter, without attracting his attention, and glimpsed the name-plate on the picture.

"I thought so," said Mona, triumphantly. "Come on—I want to show you something in the catalogue."

"There," she said. "Raphael—'Monna Vanna'—1512. Considered by many to represent the greatest phase of the master. Loaned to the Columbian Collection by J. de Veres-Croghan. Value estimated at \$125,000."

"I don't see what good it does us," said Mary, practically.

"Wait! Now I know who that young chap is who's copying it! Harry the Hun! Mary! the most famous picture thief in the world! He's done impossible things, and he's never been caught and held. If he's copying that picture it's because he means to steal it!"

"Well—that's his business," said Mary. "I still don't see where we come in..."

"If we know what he's planning to do—why isn't there a chance for us to cut in somehow?" asked Mona. "We can surely find some way to profit by what we've found out! And I don't mean giving him away, either."

"Well, I'll admit frankly that I don't see any chance," said Mary. "But there's nothing else in sight. I suppose we might as well wait for him to get through here and see where he goes. No harm in that."

"No harm—and a lot of good, perhaps," said Mona. "I've got a feeling that we've stumbled on some good luck, Mary."

There was a small park opposite the museum, and here they sat and ate their decidedly frugal repast. They had some time to wait, but they were glad to see when Harry did appear, that he paid no attention at all to them. He hurried off, instead, as if he had an appointment to keep, and they had to walk fast to keep him in sight. They managed it, however, and saw him go into a curious little store. The shop, if its sign could be believed, was kept by one Melnotte, and its windows indicated that anything might be bought within—or sold. The most extraordinary collection of odds and ends was visible, and among other things, a few paintings, which, Mona said, were of no great value or importance. But Mona was breathing fast, none the less.

"Melnotte!" she said. "Now I'm sure, Mary! This store is just a blind! Melnotte is one of the most famous 'art fences' in the country. Connoisseurs who care more about what is in their collections than how they obtain their treasures know him. He has been receiver for all sorts of stolen art treasures for years!"

"I'm beginning to think you're right," said Mary. "The thing for us to do is to establish a connection with Melnotte—and I think I see a way to do it, too!"

"Now that I've got you interested I'm sure we're going to get something done!" said Mona, confidentially. "It's when you can't see a way that I'm afraid, Mary."

"Well, you've got your part to do, too," said Mary. "You used to study art. Can you paint well enough to pretend you're making a copy of the 'Monna Vanna'?"

"Just about," said Mona. "They wouldn't throw me out if I went there to make a copy."

Next morning the paths of the two girls diverged for the time. Mona, with her easel and

her painting things, went to the museum. Harry was not there when she arrived, but after she had wandered about for a time, enjoying the opportunity to look at the pictures, she saw him come in and take his place before the 'Monna Vanna.' She waited a little longer, and then went up to him, rather timidly.

"Oh, I beg your pardon!" she said. "I wonder—would you mind very much if I sat here and copied the picture, too?"

He turned to her with a faint start of annoyance. But she was pretty enough to disarm him at once. However, it was in a rather ungracious tone that he replied:

"It is not my picture, my dear young lady," he said. "You or anyone else can come here and copy any picture you like."

Despite this rather rude beginning, they were soon chatting amicably.

Mary, meanwhile, had also been at work. She had taken out from the trunk the two old pieces of jewelry that Mona had found and cleaned them, although she did not clean them so well as to make them look too new. And with these she went to the shop of Melnotte. She was lucky enough to find Melnotte disengaged. He sized her up at once, from her timid, indifferent manner, as a woman in distress, and, because she was good looking, attended to her himself.

"I—I want to borrow something on these, if you please," she said, laying her trifles before him. He picked them up, sniffed, and then pushed them back to her.

"For heaven's sake—what do you bring me stuff like this for?" he asked, contemptuously. "This is nothing but junk you've got, my dear! And this isn't a pawn shop! We buy—and, of course, for a good customer, we will sometimes arrange a loan."

Mary looked at him pitiously. And then, as she picked up the pin and the bracelet she began to weep.

"Oh—oh!" she sobbed. "What am I to do? What am I to do? I have nothing else left—and you say these are worthless! Oh, I don't know what to do. I have got to have money, or I'll be put out of my room!"

Melnotte was a pretty thorough-paced scoundrel but he had a streak of sentiment in him that made him sorry for Mary. He might have condescended that and have hardened his heart if she hadn't been so unusually attractive. But the whole thing was too much for him. He may have had a vague idea that if he put so pretty a girl under obligations to him he might make her like him well enough to be rather nice to him later. So he came around the counter and took another look at her offering.

"Well, now, I'll tell you, young lady," he said. "I ought not to have said this was junk. It's old stuff, and I suppose the things are heirlooms."

"Oh, yes," sobbed Mary. "They're been in my family ever so long, and I wouldn't dream of parting with them if I weren't so desperate!"

"Well, well, don't cry," said Melnotte. "I'll tell you—the value of these things is sentimental. No one would buy them from me, so it wouldn't be business for me to give you anything for them. But I don't like to see you in trouble. You keep the things and I'll see what can be done for you. Suppose you let me walk around to your rooms with you and see if I can't keep your landlady quiet?"

Mary understood his purpose perfectly well. He wanted to see if she had been telling the truth. But she agreed, tearfully, and in a few minutes gave him ample proof of her story. He was impressed by the barren poverty of the room—she shared with Mona, and he did not notice that anyone else lived in the room. There was little enough, indeed, to indicate that there were two of them there.

"How much do you owe?" he asked. Mary told him the exact amount—because, of course, she expected, indirectly to get much more out of him than she could have done by naming a greater sum, which must still have been petty.

"There you are!" he said. "I'll lend you the money, and when your ship comes in you can pay me back."

Mary was overcome with gratitude, and she did not resist when he took her hand and comforted her by patting it. She did cry, however.

"Oh—it's hard to take charity," she sobbed. "Could you— isn't there some way I could do for you in your shop? Then I'd feel I was earning the money, at least!"

"Why—" he said, and paused, struck by the idea. Mary would be near him, under his influence, if he gave her a place! And—who could tell?

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own after it's been stolen, isn't it? And who would pay a great price for a picture that he would have to keep hidden after he got it?"

"That's perfectly true," said Mona. "But Harry doesn't waste his time. You may be sure that if he takes the risk of stealing the 'Monna Vanna' he and Melnotte have got a purchaser picked out for it already!"

"Won't the theft be discovered at once?" "I don't know. Not if Harry is as clever as he usually is. He stole a Gainsborough from the National Gallery in London and the theft wasn't

the picture Harry had stolen, and put it carefully into the frame from which the copy that Harry had substituted for it had been taken!"

That was the one thing Mary had not expected them to do. She had been certain somehow, that still another copy, perhaps the one Harry had been making, was going into that frame, and her whole plan had been based upon that certainty. She knew that Melnotte had been in communication with a famous collector, a rival of Croghan, the lender of the 'Monna Vanna' to the Columbian Museum, named Wellington Watson. And she had been sure, too, that she had seen through the plan they had made to hoodwink Watson. Now she was completely baffled, and she realized that she would, at the

eleventh hour, have to make an entirely new plan, unless she wanted all the work she and Mona had already done to go for nothing.

Her only grain of comfort was that she heard Melnotte, speaking over the telephone, make an appointment with Watson, for the following afternoon. They were to meet at the museum. Mary was afraid to jump at a conclusion again, but she did feel that there was a chance now to see the day.

"We'll like people working in the dark," she told Mona, that night, when the two compared notes. "So far there's been altogether too much guess work to suit me, and from now on I'd like to have some facts to work with."

"We've got to have them," said Mona. "And the one essential thing is to overhear the conversation tomorrow when Melnotte meets Watson at the museum."

Mary nodded her agreement.

"You'll have to be the one to get these facts," she said. "And I don't see how you're going to do it. They're sure to be suspicious if there's anyone within earshot."

"Leave that to me," said Mona, confidently. "I've made one or two discoveries about that museum since I've been working there with Harry. Did you ever hear of the whispering gallery?"

"Yes," said Mary, enlightening. "Do you mean to say there's something of the sort in the museum?"

"The acoustics are very peculiar," said Mona. "I won't make any promises at all, but I have hopes, very high hopes."

And the next day she took up her watch in a certain spot in the gallery. From where she waited she could not see the despoiled frame of the 'Monna Vanna' at all, but that did not trouble her. And, sure enough, after a little time, she heard the voice of Melnotte.

"I told you you'd be surprised, Mr. Watson," said the dealer. "I couldn't point out to a real collector like yourself that this is a singularly impudent copy of the famous 'Monna Vanna'."

"By Jove!" said a voice that was strange to Mona—the voice of Watson. "You're right, man! What a scandal!"

"The estimable Mr. Croghan has certainly fooled the public this time!" said Melnotte. "He gave the man his due—he's a real artist, a genius!"

"He's the real thing, and I happen to know that he paid a stiff price for this forgery of his!" He laughed, pretty foolish when this comes out."

"He's always refused to take competent advice," began Melnotte.

"Meaning yourself?" suggested Watson.

Far removed from them though she was, every word came clear and distinct to Mona's eager ears. And yet she knew that had she been within a dozen feet of them she would have heard only an indistinct and meaningless murmur. It was a curious trick of acoustics, throwing the sound of their voices about, echoing from this spot and that, that brought the sounds to her so distinctly.

Melnotte ignored the collector's interruption. "I suppose you'd like to know where the original is?" he said.

"Would I?" said Watson. "I'd lay it in like a shot and present it to the museum, just for the pleasure of seeing Croghan squirm the ignominy!"

"Well, it's not very far from here," said Melnotte. "It's in my shop, to be frank! I know I can trust you to respect my confidence!"

There was an exclamation of amazement from Watson.

"Well—I shall certainly have to see if you are right!" he said. "And if you are I'll be as good as my word—I'll take it off your hands and give it to the museum myself! Perhaps people won't take a new rich dabbler in art like Croghan so seriously after this!"

Once more Mona had to suffer the strain of waiting to learn from Mary the outcome of something of which she herself had seen the beginning. But she could wait patiently; she was sure that when Mary came home there would be news. And, as a matter of fact, she had not quite so long to wait. She hurried home herself, and in a little while the telephone rang.

"Quick!" gasped Mary. "I've only a second."

Bring your own copy of the 'Monna Vanna' down here at once! Come right into the shop—neither Harry nor Melnotte will be there. I'll meet you and get it from you. I can't explain more!"

Mona was mystified, but Mary's tone convinced her that it was of the utmost importance that she should obey her chum to the letter. She wrapped up the copy she had made, laughing at the while at its ridiculous character. It was so good a copy, she knew, despite the help Harry had given her, that it was grotesque, and it would deceive anyone who knew the original picture for a single minute. Nevertheless, she decided if Mary wanted it, she should have it.

But it was with even greater impatience that she waited at home, after a momentary talk with Mary, who had, of course, no time to tell her what was going on. And when Mary came in Mona pounced upon her before she could even take off her hat.

"Look!" cried Mary, dramatically. She lifted her skirt, and underneath, pinned fast to her underskirt, was the precious picture itself, no copy, but the original masterpiece, the famous 'Monna Vanna!'"

Mary cried Mona, in a panic. "Whatever are you going to do with that?"

"Ah—that I don't know myself, yet!" said Mary.

But Mona got the story, all or bit.

"They came back—Harry and Melnotte—with Watson," said Mary. "And they showed him the picture. He was tremendously excited, and he stirred up as I would have been if some one had offered me a wonderful diamond necklace. After talked a lot about showing up a man named Croghan—"

"I can tell you about that," said Mona, and did.

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"I see," said Mary. "Well, now, Mr. Watson said he would take the picture, and Melnotte was to send it to his house this afternoon. He offered a check, but Melnotte said he would like to have the cash, and Mr. Watson told him all right, so come and get it this evening."

"I told you Harry the Hun would have a word of getting rid of the picture," said Mona.

"That was enough for me, and now I'm slipping out and telephoning to Watson," said Mary. "Later, after Watson had gone, I told you I got the picture ready to send. But then you said you knew, so I did, and I began to wonder for the real 'Monna Vanna' was sent or not. I thought to look at it again, that was when I saw the I took of course! So, the money, the note, and gone to Mr. Watson's house, and Melnotte's going for the money to get it this evening."

Mona began to laugh explosively.

"And all the time we've been the original," she said. "Mary, Mr. Watson will immediately see what an enormous sum of money has been sent him!"

"Of course he will! And then he'll wonder how we had better sell it. I thought of just going there, getting the money, and then when what we sold it for, I'd be able to say I'd earned about the same amount, and I'd be able to say him from being suspicious. But he's pretty liberal, and I don't think he'll be suspicious."

"I think that's true, but what about me?" said Mona. "Well, I have to trust that I'm getting something, worth while, and I don't see what there's anything else we can do. I mean, I've just the best points to make, and I'm really one, too!"

And so, carrying the money in their purses, the two girls set out for Mr. Watson's house.

Melnotte and Harry had been waiting for the same time, were making plans to meet them. Melnotte was now in a very bad mood, and as he had every reason to be, he was very cross as he had every reason to be.

"We've done our best," said Harry, and Harry, old say," he said. "Melnotte is a better strike than this is going to be, and I'm really one, too!"

"It looks good," said Harry. "I've designed idea not to show before we get there."

Outside the house they saw a man, and Melnotte was to go in and get the money, and Harry outside. Harry had a very good reason, once they had the money, and he was really one, too!"

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MONA PREPARES TO COPY THE FAMOUS MONNA VANNA WITH MELNOTTE TO HELP HER.



THEY SHOWED WATSON THE GREAT PAINTING AND HE WAS TREMENDOUSLY EXCITED.